

TogaMan Guitars

by WARD MEEKER

In the early 1980s, Jonathan Wilson was a guitarist who became enthralled by neo-classical rock and the music of former Scorpions guitarist Uli Roth and his Sky Guitar, with its 36-plus frets that allowed him to add violin-range notes to his repertoire. “The idea of creating an instrument one’s art requires, rather than limiting it to what exists, inspired me,” he said. “Roth’s references to Vivaldi and Paganini led me to listen to a lot of violin and cello music. I spent hours doing volume swells to emulate those sounds, then began to view the guitar as incomplete without the facility to bow. Of course, most luthiers and musicians viewed me as crazy, so I had to fulfill my own vision.”

And fulfill it, he did. By the early '90s, Wilson had been experimenting heavily, and developed a prototype instrument he called an “electric arpeggione,” inspired by a bowed guitar built by Johan Stauffer in the early 1800s. In the years that followed, he designed and built a progression of mockups, and by late '02 the arpeggione had evolved into a prototype of his GuitarViol.

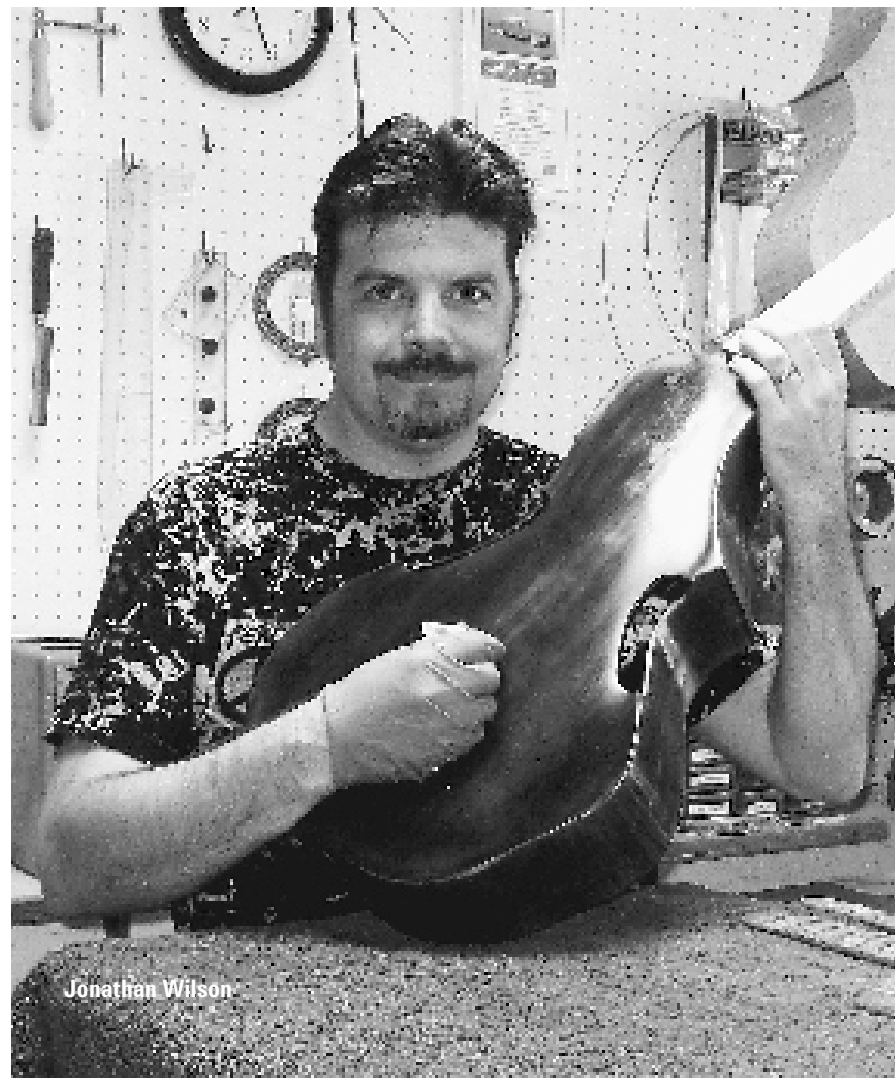
“Within a month, I was contacted by a math professor who expressed interest,” he recalled. “And with virtually no marketing intention, TogaMan Guitars was born.”

Where did the TogaMan name come from?

It is inspired by the toga/tunic figure in “Noces de Cana” a painting by Paolo Veronese that depicts the water-to-wine wedding scene in the Bible. In it, a man is playing a guitar-sized viol in a guitar-like playing stance. It provides a quick history lesson. Besides, “Wilson” sounds too much like sports equipment or the next-door neighbor on a TV sitcom... Plus, there are a few namesakes out there that would cause some confusion.

Did you initially build part-time?

Yes. For eight or nine years, I worked at Cassells Music, in San Fernando, while moonlighting at this. Soon after that first order, I was getting the



Jonathan Wilson

attention of top film composers who asked me build one for them. Before long, I was nine to 12 months backlogged! Then I exhibited at NAMM in '05. After that, I realized that I prefer a direct relationships with artists rather than going through dealers.

Did anything in particular create interest in the instrument?

Composer Tyler Bates used his GuitarViol while recording the score for the movie *300*, which got a lot of attention. In mid January '08, I worked up the nerve to jump out on my own, then exhibited at the Newport-Miami Guitar Festival that April. By the grace of God, I've been backlogged up to a year.

How long was it before

you offered a second guitar?

After the first Cana models, which had alder bodies finished with custom factory finishes by Pat Wilkins, I added a simple hand-rubbed finish and dubbed it the Naked Spartan. Then I offered an upgrade called the Cana Deluxe, with an alder or mahogany body with figured-maple top, Wilkins finish, and flame-maple neck.

In mid '08, I built one for Steve Oimette called the Canavarious, which had a carved violin-style maple top and a distressed faux-violin finish. The vintage vibe went over huge, so I began to offer genuine shellac French-polish finishes on the maple-capped Deluxes. I call those Cana Customs, and no two are the

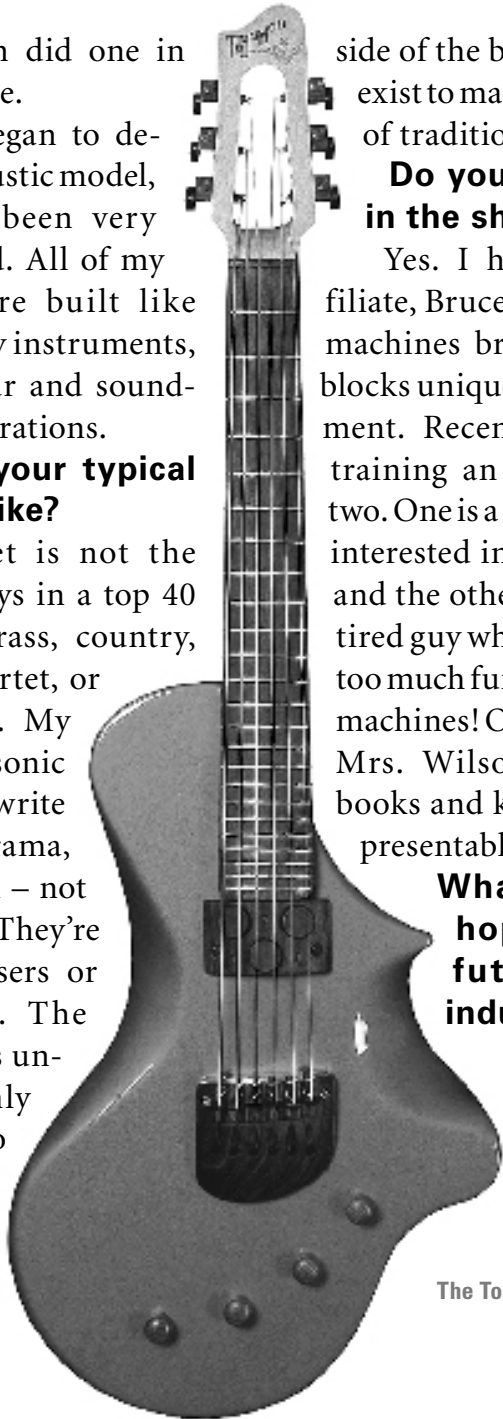


same. I even did one in spalted maple.

In '06 I began to develop an acoustic model, and it has been very well-received. All of my acoustics are built like violin-family instruments, with bass bar and sound-post configurations.

What is your typical customer like?

My market is not the guy who plays in a top 40 band, bluegrass, country, classical quartet, or jazz combo. My clients are sonic artists who write for sound, drama, and emotion – not pop hooks. They're film composers or art-rockers. The GuitarViol is understood only by those who think out-



side of the box. It does not exist to make converts out of traditionalists.

Do you work alone in the shop?

Yes. I have a key affiliate, Bruce Johnson, who machines bridges and tail blocks unique to the instrument. Recently, I've been training an apprentice or two. One is a college student interested in french polish and the other is a semi-retired guy who's having way too much fun with his CNC machines! Other than that, Mrs. Wilson helps with books and keeps the place presentable.

What are your hopes for the future of the industry?

I hope to see the mass-market mental-

ity – which has all but killed our country and cheapened our craft to price-point commodities – be replaced by the village business model on a global level. I'd like to see us bring back imagination, passion, and craftsmanship for our kids to appreciate.

What are your goals for TogaMan, specifically?

I hope to refine my instrument to it's best possible form. I'm building a steel-stringed/x-braced acoustic flat-top modeled after the acoustic GuitarViol in aesthetics.

Also, if a mid-size manufacturer is interested in licensing the GuitarViol

and making them available to kids or college students who can't afford hand-built instruments, I would be willing to talk. I plan on hand-building acoustics for a long time, but am not personally interested in running a factory. I'm at my best carving away, not being distracted by the banal left-brain aspects of running a business with employees punching a clock.

In personal terms, I see myself recording more of my music for film projects. The funny thing about this is that I created an instrument to satisfy my own musical ventures and it took off! That said, I love what I do and am deeply grateful to be doing it. **VG**



The TogaMan electric and acoustic GuitarViol.